

Session Four:

LEGACIES OF URBAN REALMS AND RURAL COMMUNITIES

As people of African descent arrived in or moved to the burgeoning cities, they established uniquely urban cultures. In rural areas, many black towns were established during Reconstruction, where blacks expressed their environmental and commercial values and traditions. Historic and continuing influences of African origins are evident on both the urban and rural landscape.

Traditional African Architecture and Its Impact on Place Making: Case Studies From African and African American Communities

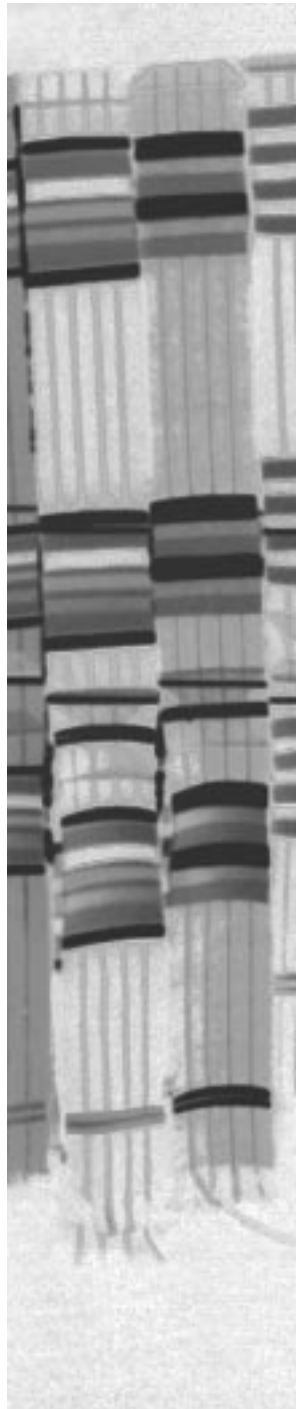
Abimbola O. Asojo

Gardening, Yard Decoration, and Agriculture Among People of African Descent in the Rural South and the Cayman Islands

Richard Westmacott

***Por La Encendida Calle Antillana:* African Influences on Puerto Rican Architecture**

Arleen Pabón



**Places of Cultural Memory:
African Reflections on the American Landscape**

Traditional African Architecture and Its Impact on Place Making: Case Studies from African and African-American Communities

Abimbola O. Asojo

Since the era of independence from colonial rule in African nations and the civil rights movements in the United States, Africans and African-Americans have engaged in developing new identities through the integration of culture in the design of contemporary societies. This paper examines the impact of cultural, historical, and traditional African architecture on historical and contemporary design practices. Traditional architectural forms from Africa are presented to illustrate significant elements of the style, its applications, and implications on contemporary design practices in African and African-American communities.

Traditional African Architecture

Traditional African architecture varies from simple rectangular dwellings in clay, to round houses, tents, sophisticated tombs, obelisks, palaces, pyramids, and monumental structures built by peoples of varying cultures all over Africa. A diversity of building forms existed in traditional African societies, and most of them built highly ornamented structures. The Tassili cave paintings illustrate early forms of human communities in the Sahara desert in Africa. These cave paintings convey information about life in the Sahara region before the rivers and lakes of the desert began to dry, forcing people to move closer to the Nile. Some contemporary historians have stressed the influences of Saharan art and engravings on ancient Egyptian art. Some of these scholars believe ancient Egyptian art borrowed heavily from Saharan art, which preceded,

then ran parallel to the Egyptian form. Cave paintings were not restricted only to this area. Some have been found in South Africa, predating those in the Sahara.(1)

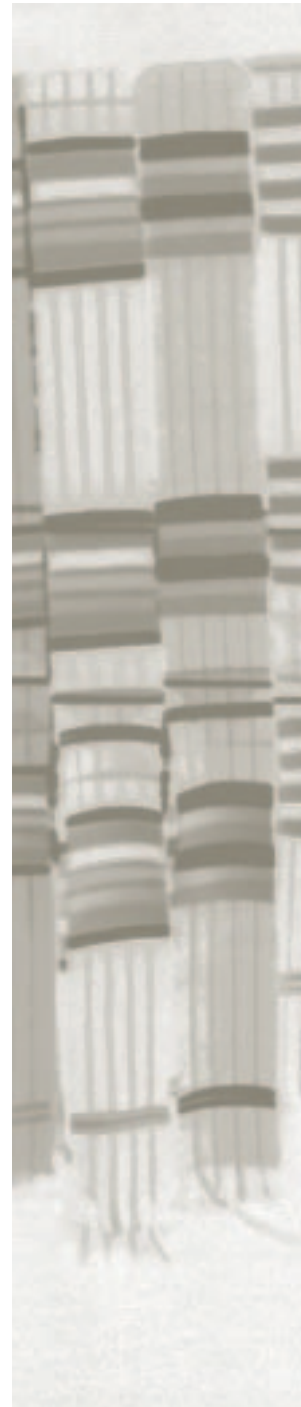
Early Innovations of African Craftsmanship

An early innovative example of African craftsmanship is the Ethiopian Monarchy's Obelisk at Aksum (B. C. 300–A. D. 300), which highlights techniques of building freestanding masonry structures. The Obelisk at Aksum was 108 feet tall, with false doors, windows, columns, and wall treatments that had horizontal timber reinforcements and outward projecting wooden stumps. Today, an obelisk still stands in Rome, approximately 25 meters high, the second largest built by the ancient Akumites. It was looted on the orders of Mussolini, and taken to Italy in 1937.(2) In addition, the Meroetic pyramids (North Cemetery at Meroe, B. C. 250–A. D. 350) in Sudan show early craftsmanship in building royal tombs and structures.

Other early illustrations of innovative building techniques are the grand castles and great stone monuments of Zimbabwe. Timbuktu, Mali, and Benin were some medieval empires of West Africa that built exorbitant structures. Denyer noted "the ancient city of Benin, the capital of the Benin Empire was an urban center when the Portuguese arrived in Benin around 1500."(3) Historians have stated they found a city that was a nautical mile long from gate to gate; the inhabitants were prosperous and experienced in metalworking.(4) The empire was later burned down and looted by the British invaders. Today, the looted artifacts from these nations can be found in museums throughout the western world.(5) Despite these precedents, many historical surveys in architecture stop primarily at Egyptian civilization, ignoring the civilizations south of the Sahara.

Session Four:

Legacies of Urban Realms and Rural Communities



Traditional African Architectural Styles

Some authors have classified traditional African architecture as tents; Sudanese style; Impluvium style; Hill style; Beehive; Ghorfas; Kasbahs; and, underground structures.(6) Hunters, gatherers, and pastoralists who needed structures that could be dismantled and transported usually used tent structures. The Tuaregs in West Africa utilized these structures during the trans-Saharan trade. They were based on a framework of hoops covered by mats. The average family could pack its house and their entire belongings on the back of a camel or a donkey. The Masai were pastoralists living in northern Tanzania and southern Kenya, their houses were semi portable, and made out of wooden frames which were often transported on the back of animals. The Fulanis, who are distributed throughout West Africa, took their cattle around over large distances, moving from one settlement to another, and utilizing materials available on the site to construct their tents.

Sudanese style was generally a variety of rectangular adobe buildings with courtyards, found mostly in West Africa in areas where Islam was dominant. The style has often been attributed to Islamic influence. However, excavation at Nteresso in Northern Ghana reveal the remains of rectangular planning, and the fact that Fulanis, Nupes, and Khassonkes—other convertees to Islam—did not build in Sudanese style also suggested the style predated Islam. Several characteristics of the style are courtyard plans, flat or dome-shaped vaulted roofs, parapets pierced with gutter pipes or channels. Walls were constructed of mud bricks set in mortar and mud roofs supported by palm frond joist.

Impluvium style was houses with four buildings facing one another in a courtyard, with gabled roofs. Examples are found among the Benin, Yoruba, Asante, and Ibo peoples of West Africa. Yoruba palaces for kings were larger versions of the Impluvium style. The Yorubas had a monarchy system that considered the King's Palace as sacred. The Palace consisted of hundreds of courtyards, with several buildings facing each other in the courtyards. In the palaces, elaborately carved columns supported gabled roofs along the courtyard perimeters. Dwelling units were also built on a courtyard plan, with four rectangular units facing each other in a courtyard.

The largest palace in the Oyo Empire was twice the size of a sports field. Each of the courtyards was reserved for special functions. The largest used for public assemblies or dancing at festivals, while smaller ones were used for the King's private activities. Some of the courtyards were paved with quartz pebbles and potsherds.(7) Today, the largest palace is in Owo, Southwestern Nigeria and covers 44 hectares (4,400 acres).

Archaeological and ethnographical studies indicate that traditional Yoruba towns comprised several compounds, and each compound consisted of houses built around a series of open courtyards of different sizes, which usually contained pots to collect water from rooftop. Yoruba cities were roughly circular in shape, and surrounded by some kind of defensive wall. The afin (King's palace) was an intricate labyrinth of rooms and courtyards, often decorated with sculpted doors, walls, and columns. Andah noted "family and compound continue as it were from all sides of the palace and merge into one another."(8)

This feature of continuity is reflected in the opening lines of the poems in the Yoruba divinatory system of Ifa. One

such poem reads: "build a house around you Ifa, so you can build a house around me, so you can let children surround me, so you let money surround me." The architectural forms of the city are interlocked within a well-defined concentric town plan. Yoruba architecture is an organization of disparate units into an interlocking whole. The compound design expresses an architecture of intimacy and encourages the success of the extended family.

The Asantes, found in present-day Ghana, constructed their buildings based on a courtyard system, with a central courtyard usually joining four buildings; the fourth one was usually closed off. The courtyard was used as a meeting space, children's play area, and a place for food preparation. Windows ornamented in gold, silver inlay, and applied finish demonstrated the wealth of the Asantes. The Asantes were governed by a monarchy system, and historical surveys found the King's Palace located in the center of the town overlooking a central playground for children.

The palace consisted of several buildings surrounding a number of courtyards, typical in many West African palaces. The walls were well decorated with symbolic ornamentation, and the main entrance of the palace led to a court 200 yards long. The roof structures of the palace buildings itself were primarily of gabled form. The Asantes also built royal mausoleums for their kings that contained several rooms that housed their remains. The link between the living and the dead made these mausoleums uniquely celebrated buildings.

Hill style houses were usually found in hilly settlements around Africa, and their main features were stone terracing and round buildings, with diameters less than their heights.

Beehive styles were built of stepped thatch, houses were usually round plan and often dome shaped. Pliable material like reeds, grass, leaves, woven mats, and animal skins were often used.

Ghorfas were multi-story, barrel-vaulted stone storage chambers, constructed with stone, sun baked brick, or fired baked bricks.

Kasbahs were ten or more stories high structures built out of packed clay and air-dried bricks. They were usually built to house families of one ancestral origin. They evolved out of defensive necessities, and have often been referred to as forts built in indigenous Moroccan styles.

Underground structures were commonly rectangular or circular in plan with roof structures supported by branches and rafters covered by earth.

Traditional African architecture cannot be examined without examining African decorative arts since both are closely related in African societies. Some of the decorative arts of Africa include symbols, patterns, motifs, dress, fabrics, hairstyles, body decoration, metal work, carving, pottery, basketry, beadwork, wall decoration, etc. Ola Balogun noted "African artistic genius was strongly asserted in the decorative embellishment of the built environment. Varying decorative patterns could be found sculpted or painted on walls and wooden doors, which ranged from figurative designs to complex abstract patterns which revealed an exquisite balance of form, color, and shading. Painting was carried out as an extension of architecture than an independent medium."(9)

Calvin Douglas of the Brooklyn Museum of Arts noted "Artistic expression is not the luxury to African peoples that it has become to the west. It is considered a natural and necessary way of giving meaning to phases of a person's

life and enhancing his work. This tradition continues in independent African countries today, where cultural dances and attires are used in political festivals. In addition, if the vitality of a culture can be measured in terms of its ability to produce art and enlarge its conception of human life, it is not difficult to understand why so many black people in the U[nited] S[tates] today look to Africa as their cultural source".(10)

Traditional African Forms and Decorative Arts in Seventeenth & Eighteenth Century America

The contribution of African-Americans in historic America has often gone unacknowledged. Vlach noted "[T]he material achievements of blacks are generally assumed to have been negligible, if not non-existent. Yet, now and again, diligent scholarship brings to light an Afro-American tradition in basketry, ironwork, pottery and other crafts. The mortar and pestle, dug out canoes of Chesapeake region and banjo are African influences in American landscape."(11) The African-American shotgun house has been noted to have its roots in African architecture. New Orleans is considered the center of shotgun housing development in the United States. Shotgun houses are usually one room wide and several rooms long with a gable roof facing the main street. Towns of southern Haiti have houses similar to the shotgun houses in Louisiana. The houses were also one room wide and one story high with their gables facing the main road. Historians have linked the occurrence of shotgun houses in Haiti and Louisiana to trade links and immigration.

Vlach noted the "architectural links between Port-au-Prince and New

Orleans cannot be denied. All the nonessential details that are associated with the shotgun in Haiti are also associated with the shotgun in Louisiana, although not always to same degree. It is evident that the concept of Shotgun houses was imported from Haiti."(12) The Haitian shotgun had its roots in Yoruba, West Africa. Vlach noted that "Yoruba and Yoruba related peoples were brought to Haiti in the first days of slavery in sufficient numbers to preserve many traits of their African culture".(13) The basic Yoruba house form consists of a two-room linear building, the first room is the parlor/kitchen and the second a bedroom. Impluvium style houses, mentioned earlier, are a multiplication of this basic unit, and the roofs were also gable in form.

Post-Colonial African Spaces

Since the era of independence from colonial rule in the 1960s, there has been a cultural revival in many African nations. Current design practices incorporate elements from traditional Africa in contemporary spaces. Contemporary African architecture is deeply rooted in Mazuri's "triple heritage," which presents African history as comprised of three principal influences: indigenous, western, and Islamic. Western influences began with the Greeks in B. C. 333, continuing through Roman settlement in B. C. 146, and Europeans in mid fourteenth century. Portuguese constructed medieval fortress architecture, the English built gothic forts, Victorian style houses, and English cottages. The Dutch erected Victorian style houses, and Brazilian style houses were built by free men and women, returned to Africa after the abolition of slave trade. International styles buildings were designed by African who went abroad to

Places of Cultural Memory: African Reflections on the American Landscape

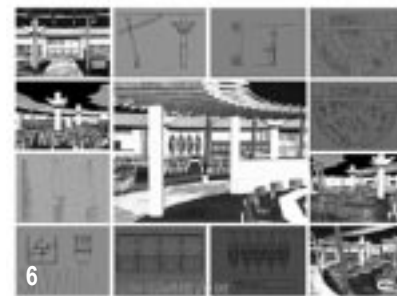
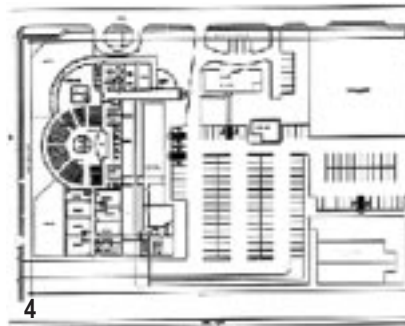


Figure 1. Dominican Catholic Church, Ibadan, Nigeria.

Figure 2. Cultural Center, Ibadan, Nigeria.

Figure 3. Oduduwa Hall, Ile-Ife, Nigeria.

Figure 4. Saint Mary's, Houston, Texas.

Figure 5. Saint Benedict the African, Chicago, IL

Figure 6. Entertainment Space: Larry Levy.

study, and expatriate architects who practiced in many African nations, after independence from colonial rule.⁽¹⁴⁾

Islamic influences were more predominant in North Africa, because of its strategic location (Egypt fell to Arabs in A. D. 641). Trade contact with people east of the Indian Ocean, from China and Arabia, facilitated Islamic influences in this area. The West African Trans-Saharan trade gave Islam a route to West Africa. Structures were made out of coral limestone, flat roofs, domes, gables, and vaults. Many West African mosques had West African features. The

Djenne Mosque in Mali is an example of a mosque built out of adobe in Sudanese style architecture.

Today, several architects are striving to recapture elements from traditional African architecture lost since colonial rule. Nigerian architect Demas Nwoko's Catholic Church in Ibadan, Nigeria, designed in the late seventies, is one example. The church was designed for the Dominican Order in the Catholic Church, which takes a vow of simplicity. (Figure 1) African forms are integrated in the design, through the use of natural materials; the concrete masonry unit wall is left plain and unfinished, the steeple on the roof is roughly fashioned, and the walkway around the perimeter of the church is finished in cobbled stone. A pond around the perimeter of the church relates to the Yoruba's appreciation of natural forms. The building is modeled on the traditional West African hut style, and the sanctuary radiates around the altar, serving as a central focus, similar to palaces and shrines in traditional African societies.

Another of Nwoko's designs the cultural center in Ibadan, Nigeria sits on a hilly site in Ibadan, serving as a cultural landmark. (Figure 2) Natural materials are utilized to recall traditional architectural forms, the relationship with nature, and the Yoruba's appreciation for natural forms. The articulated exterior walls appear to be telling a story similar to forms utilized in traditional societies.

Another example is the Oduduwa hall, at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria. (Figure 3) This amphitheater was designed by Sharon and Sharon, from 1969-1972. Ile-Ife is regarded in Yoruba mythology as the cradle of civilization. The building form mimics the bronze heads carved in traditional African societies. Landscaping the base plane is used to express the impor-

tance of nature, and the murals on the building walls are elements from traditional Yoruba geometry, which appear to be telling a story similar to traditional environments.

Twentieth Century African American Spaces

African-American communities are engaged in cultural revival through spaces, which integrate culture-based issues. Saint Mary's Catholic Church, Houston, Texas, designed by the African-American firm of Archi-technics/3 approaches culture-based issues through form, materials, and artifacts. (Figure 4) The final design incorporates a "parti," based on interlocking circles. A gathering space with a baptismal font in form of the Goree Island provides a transition from the outside to inside, which the priest interprets as being synonymous with the passage from slavery to freedom.

Another example, Saint Benedict the African, was built in a Chicago neighborhood of African Americans in 1990. (Figure 5) The building committee and architects, Belli & Belli, while concerned about representing the community's heritage were also concerned with creating a place that would uplift the spirit. A concept of interlocking circles, based upon traditional West African compound dwellings, was represented by multiples of circular forms interlocking each other. African form is again reinforced through the materials of the sanctuary ceiling of wood decking, semi-circular seating plan, and trees planted below grade along the interior walls.

Other renowned examples are Robert Mills' winning entry for the Washington Monument Competition, which is modeled after the African Obelisk from Ethiopia (15); William

Stanley's Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, which uses African forms (16); and Jack Travis in his cultural interpretation for Wesley Snipes.(17)

Summary

The impacts of traditional African architecture on African and African-American spaces are numerous. The most recurring elements today include building forms based on the traditional African hut, gathering spaces, natural forms, courtyards, carved doors and columns, ironmongery, interlocking forms, and rectilinear planning. Developing an Afrocentric architecture that recalls African traditional architecture is not an easy task; the process requires not only a consideration of building form but cultural meaning, and a design process that empowers the community through building communities. Other prominent concepts begin with the building forms inspired by styles deeply rooted in African culture and materials. Surface articulation and space delineation are some other design elements. The major challenges today lie in integrating pre-colonial and post-colonial Africa spaces to create a unique Afrocentric architectural style.

Notes

1. Macleod, "The Nile's Other Kingdom, Nubia: Nubia, not Egypt, May Have Been the First True African Civilization," in *Time Magazine: Commemorative Issue* (1997): 102-106.
2. Nnamdi Elleh, *African Architecture Evolution and Transformation* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1997).
3. Susan Denyer, *African Traditional Architecture* (New York: Africana Publishing Company, 1978).
4. Denyer, *African Traditional Architecture*.

5. Elleh, *African Architecture Evolution and Transformation*.

6. Denyer, *African Traditional Architecture*, Richard Hull, *African Cities and Towns Before the European Conquest* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1976); Herbert Porthon, *Architectural Styles* (New York: Facts on File Publication, 1982); Labelle Prussin, *Islamic Design in West Africa* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986); Elleh, *African Architecture Evolution and Transformation*.

7. Denyer, *African Traditional Architecture*.

8. Bassey Andah, *Nigeria's Indigenous Technology*, (Nigeria: Ibadan University Press, 1992).

9. Ola Balogun, "Form and expression in African arts," in *Introduction to African Culture: General Aspects*, 69: 1979, Paris: UNESCO.

10. Douglas quote found in Louise E. Jefferson, *The Decorative Arts of Africa* (New York: Viking Press, 1970).

11. John M. Vlach, "By the Works of Their Hands. Studies in Afro-American Folk Life," in *American Material Culture and Folklife* (London: UMI Research Press, 1976).

12. Vlach, "By the Works of Their Hands".

13. Ibid.

14. Elleh, *African Architecture Evolution and Transformation*.

15. Brad Grant, "Cultural Politics and Pedagogy," in *Voices in Aritectural Education* (New York: Bergin and Garvey, 1991); Elleh, *African Architecture Evolution and Transformation*.

16. J. Moline, "MLK's Congregation in Atlanta Gets a Striking New Sanctuary," in *Architectural Record* 5(1999): 104.

17. N. A. Diop, "Jack Travis Cultural Vanguard. Persistence Continuing in a Course in the Face of Difficulties," in *Blacklines* 1(1999): 10-13.

Bibliography

Andah, Bassey. *Nigeria's Indigenous Technology*. Nigeria: Ibadan University Press, 1992.

Antoniades, Anthony C. *Poetics of Architecture: Theory of Design*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1990.

Asante, Kete, Mofeti. *Afrocentricity*. New Jersey: Africa World Press, Inc., 1996.

Balogun, Ola. "Form and Expression in African Arts." In *Introduction to African Culture: General Aspects*, 69(1979). Paris: UNESCO.

Barrie Thomas. "The Context of Sacred Architecture." In *Journal on Religion, Art & Architecture* 3(1997): 9.

Boyer, E. L. and Mitgang, L. *Building Community, A New Future for Architecture Education and Practice*. Princeton, New Jersey: The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1996.

Denyer, Susan. *African Traditional Architecture*. New York: Africana Publishing Company, 1978.

Diop, Cheika Anta Diop. *The African Origin of Civilization Myth or Reality*. New York: Lawrence Hill & Company, 1974.

Diop, N. A. "Jack Travis Cultural Vanguard. Persistence Continuing in a Course in the Face of Difficulties." In *Blacklines* 1(1999): 10-13.

Elleh, Nnamdi. *African Architecture Evolution and Transformation*. New York: McGraw Hill, 1997.

Grant, Brad. "Cultural Politics and Pedagogy." *Voices in Architectural Education*. New York: Bergin and Garvey, 1991.

Guidoni, Enrico. *Primitive Architecture*, (trans.) R. E. Wolf. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1978.

Hull, Richard. *African Cities and Towns Before the European Conquest*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1976.

Jefferson, Louise E. *In the Decorative Arts of Africa*. New York: Viking Press, 1970.

King, Neol. *African Cosmos, An Introduction to Religion in Africa*. California: Wadsworth Inc., 1986.

Macleod, S. "The Nile's Other Kingdom Nubia: Nubia, not Egypt May Have Been the First True African Civilization." In *Time Magazine: Commemorative Issue* (1997): 102-106.

Moline, J. "MLK'S Congregation in Atlanta Gets a Striking New Sanctuary." In *Architectural Record* 5(1999): 104

Parrinder, Geoffrey. *African Traditional Religion*. London: S.P.C.K., 1962.

Porthon, Herbert. *Architectural Styles*. New York: Facts on File Publication, 1982.

Prussin, Labelle. *Islamic Design in West Africa*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986.

Rapport, Amos. "Vernacular Architecture and the Cultural Determinants of Form." In *Buildings and Society*, 281-305. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980.

Rodney, W. *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. Washington D.C.: Howard University Press, 1982.

Vlach, John M. "By the Works of Their Hands. Studies in Afro-American Folklife." In *American Material Culture and Folklife*. London: UMI Research Press, 1976.

Source Notes about Photos

Figure 1. Dominican Catholic Church. Source: Photo by author.

Figure 2. Cultural Center. Source: Photo by author.

Figure 3. Oduduwa Hall. Source: Photo by author.

Figure 4. Saint Mary's. Source: St. Mary's Building Committee.

Figure 5. Saint Benedict the African. Source: St. Benedict's Building Committee.

Figure 6. Entertainment Space. Source: Studio project by Larry Levy.